



## Youth Mental Health:

## Colorado Crisis Services Promotion and Staffing

### Problem

- (1) **Safe2Tell is Not Equipped for Mental Health Response** – Given that suicide is the second-leading cause of death for children, teenagers, and young adults in Colorado, mental health support should remain a top priority for parents, youth, and stakeholders statewide.<sup>1</sup> Even so, the resources that do exist, specifically Safe2Tell and Colorado Crisis Services, are inaccurately publicized and lack the general capacity necessary to properly provide for Colorado youth. To expand, Safe2Tell was created in 2004 in response to the tragic school shooting at Columbine as a school safety mechanism for students and teachers to report anonymous tips about potential security threats.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Colorado Crisis Services was established in 2018 as a 24/7 support system for individuals experiencing a mental health crisis.<sup>3</sup> However, this distinction is rarely, if ever, discussed in schools, and students continue to misuse Safe2Tell as a mental health resource when it addresses an entirely different problem. In fact, Safe2Tell mandates that for each tip received, police take action; consequently, when an individual contacts Safe2Tell seeking support for themselves or a loved one, law enforcement deploys and contacts the school district. Left without the support they sought, students in crisis often feel uncomfortable with the outcome and are dissuaded from seeking help in the future. This result contributes to the estimated 9,600 contemplated suicides in Colorado, of which half to two-thirds never see formal service providers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, youth rarely recognize Colorado Crisis Services as a resource. Being unaware of this resource, they are left without an outlet for help. In summary, issues of mental health remain a pressing threat for youth; however, Colorado's mental health services are incapable of adequately responding to the statewide mental health crisis if they are not properly communicated to Coloradan youth.

<sup>1</sup> Gallagher, K. (2022, February). *Suicide in Colorado*. The Colorado Trust.

<sup>2</sup> History. History | S2T CO. (n.d.).

<https://safe2tell.org/history#:~:text=Originally%20funded%20through%20the%20generous,of%20Public%20Safety%2C%20the%20Colorado.>

<sup>3</sup> About. Colorado Crisis Services. (2021, June 4). <https://coloradocrisiservices.org/about/>.

- (2) **Colorado Youth are Unaware of Peer Options** – Colorado Crisis Services also offers a peer-to-peer support option. If a student is not in immediate crisis, they will be directed to a peer support counselor. This counselor is a volunteer (rather than a staff member) trained to talk about various mental health concerns and direct callers to local community health clinics for further care. Most youth are not aware of this resource and fail to receive peer support from the line.
- (3) **Coronavirus has Impacted Youth Health** – In the final week of June 2020, adults in the United States experienced drastic increases in struggles with mental health due to COVID-19. Following Colorado's state-wide lockdown, reported rates of isolation skyrocketed. The pandemic disproportionately impacted racial/ethnic minorities, Gen Z/ Millennials, essential workers, and older adults, with reports of increased substance use and elevated suicidal ideation.<sup>4</sup> From May to July, the increased social isolation, job loss, and general pessimism about the coming months intensified symptoms of anxiety and depression. The social isolation caused by COVID-19 was more likely to impact households with older adults and adolescents, jeopardizing the mental health of these individuals. 47% of those sheltering in place reported negative mental health impacts related to the pandemic, with 21% reporting severe negative impacts.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, Colorado Crisis Services has reported a significant uptick in call demand during the pandemic. A lack of resources strains the call center, causing long wait times for those who seek help from the service. Furthermore, Coloradans continue to face psychological and social trauma due to job losses, the death of loved ones, and social isolation for years to come.

## Solutions

- (1) **Advertisement Brings Engagement** – The Colorado Youth Advisory Council proposes that the phone number for Colorado Crisis Services (CCS) be printed onto the back of every student ID statewide. Safe2Tell already employs this constant visual reminder. It is an effective way to increase student's knowledge of Safe2Tell's existence. Including the CCS phone number will not only familiarize high schoolers with this resource, but ensure that all students know how to access it. Furthermore, most high schools already issue student IDs; printing the number for CCS to the back would place minimal financial burden while still educating students about the value of CCS as a mental health resource.

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<sup>4</sup> *Coloradans' state of mind: THE Pandemic's impact on mental health*. The Colorado Health Foundation. (n.d.). <https://coloradohealth.org/insights/good-health/coloradans-state-mind-pandemics-impact-mental-health>.

<sup>5</sup> Nirmita Panchal, R. K, et al 2021, F. (2021, July 20). *The implications of Covid-19 for mental health and substance use*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

- (2) **Peer to Peer Options Cut Costs**– Additional promotion of the peer-to-peer line created by CCS should be implemented. Peer counselors are significantly cheaper for CCS as they require no salary, but rather only administrative fees. Additional awareness of this option could help callers review less formalized care and reduce operating CCS costs.
- (3) **Colorado Crisis Services Lacks Staff** – The Colorado Youth Advisory Council implores the State to fund additional mental health professionals at Colorado Crisis Services. Increasing the FTE of this organization will not only underscore the state’s commitment to mental health, but provide much-needed support for residents statewide facing crisis in the face of the pandemic. Each of the additional mental health professionals will work at the call center to answer calls/texts from those in need. Properly allocating the State’s resources in this manner will diminish the wait time that prevents Coloradans from seeking help, further enhancing the mental health of residents statewide.